Narasimha, Sarabha, Gandaberunda and Pratyangira

Narasimha, the fourth avatar of Vishnu, does not disappear after killing Hiranyakashipu. The Shiva Puran reveals some interesting details about the second half of this story. Why did Shiva have to incarnate as the Sarabha? What does the Gandaberunda symbolise? Who is Pratyangira? How can we find her in our life? Read on…

The Narasimha

Yes, the Narasimha, the fiery-eyed man-beast emerged from the middle of a pillar, neither from the sky nor from the earth. The asura Hiranyakashipu imagined that he was invincible. So the Narasimha did not frighten him. He engaged in a duel with the Narasimha foolishly believing that he could indeed overpower someone like God. This served one purpose very well. It stoked the wrath of the Narasimha. The Narasimha looked at Prahalada briefly, clutched Hiranyakashipu with his talons, shook him like a rag doll and walked with grim determination to the threshold, neither inside or outside, placed the asura on his lap, neither on the earth or the sky, it was the twilight hour, neither day or night and then ripped through his abdomen with his claws without using any weapons. We are familiar with this part of the story. But what happened after this?

Shiva and the Narasimha

But the wrath of the Narasimha could not be subdued even after he killed Hiranyakashipu. So ferocious was the

Narasimha’s rage that the constellations and the planets shuddered with fear. Even Vishnu watched the Narasimha in mute despair because he did not have the wherewithal to curb the undiluted fury of his own avatar. The devas trembled with fear and intuitively sensed that the Narasimha was hell-bent on destroying all the three worlds and everything that was contained in it.

So they first sent Prahalada to the Narasimha and hoped he could calm the manticore. But the Narasimha picked up the boy, licked him lovingly, put him back onto the earth and continued wreaking havoc in the entire universe. The devas rushed to Shiva for help.

Narasimha and Virabhadra

Shiva took the form of Virabhadra, laughed loudly on seeing the Narasimha’s fury and said, “You Vishnu, are supposed to be the preserver of the cosmos. You did a grand job of protecting the universe when you incarnated as Matsya, Kuurma, Varaha and now as Narasimha. But your work is not yet over.

You will have to incarnate again, repeatedly, to maintain the balance in the universe. Don’t be so obsessed with this form of yours. If you think you are indomitable, think again. Don’t assume you can destroy the cosmos and control Kaala. Because I, Shiva am KaalaKalaa and I’m here to bring you to your senses.” But the Narasimha simply grew larger, larger than the universe itself and continued to emit cosmic fire through his entire body. His rage could not be reasoned with.

Shiva as the Sarabha

Shiva was left with no choice. He manifested as the Sarabha, an enormous golden bird with eight legs, a part lion part elephant face, a long tail and one eye on top of its enormous head.

The Sarabha had a thousand arms, matted hair, feet the size of planets and wings that spanned eternity. It was infused with Shiva's Shaktis – the feminine energies of Pratyangira and Soolini. The Sarabha gave a loud shrill humkara and jumped to a great height with a single giant leap.

Vishnu was awestruck by the ferocious form that Shiva had created. But even a mighty bird like the Sarabha did not frighten the Narasimha. If anything, it only added fuel to his volatile anger.

Narasimha retaliates as Gandaberunda

The manticore now took the form of a humongous bird animal called Gandaberunda and prepared to engage in a duel with the Sarabha.

A fierce war ensued between the Sarabha and the Gandaberunda. The Sarabha tried to fathom the mysterious mystic behaviour of the Narasimha who had transformed into Gandaberunda. And failed. So it did what it had to do. It was here on a mission and there was no more room for thought or empathy.

The Sarabha knew that only his feminine Shakti, Pratyangira could deal with the Gandaberunda. Pratyangira did not fail him.

She radiated all her Shakti from her forehead. This Shakti enveloped the Gandaberunda in a warm powerful loving embrace and calmly waited till the Gandaberunda reached the state of absolute stillness.

The Sarabha watched Pratyangira at work with detached amusement. And Shiva as Sarabha knew he would have to use his energies wisely if he wanted to deal with Vishnu’s avatars.

The Sarabha now took a long deep breath and suddenly there was a deathly eerie silence throughout the cosmos. It assumed an enormous form and the Narasimha looked like an ant beside it now. The massive Sarabha gave a deadly humkara, sailed through eternity and circled the Narasimha with grim determination. It had a penetrating gaze. It swooped down on the man-beast precisely, clutched it with its razor-sharp beak and ripped apart the Narasimha with its talons.

The rage of the Narasimha seamlessly flowed into the Sarabha now. It thirsted for the Narasimha’s blood. It gave a loud shrill shriek and decapitated the Narasimha with a single swoop of its wing. It then flew back and mutilated the body of the Narasimha with its other wing. Yet its anger could not be doused. It ripped the hide off the bleeding half-broken body of the Narasimha and draped it around its waist. It then picked up the skull of the manticore, smiled and wore it around its neck as a garland.

Mutilated and decapitated, Vishnu regained his original blue form instantly. Sobered and with a contrite expression, Vishnu bowed down before Shiva and thanked him for bringing him to

his senses and restoring the energies of Sattva into him. Vishnu and Shiva then embraced each other and prepared to go to Vaikuntha and Kailasha respectively.

Shiva deals with the Sarabha's fury

But the gods stopped them. They had to deal with a new but very real fear again because now the Sarabha was finding it difficult to control its volatile fury. They urged Shiva to put an end to the Sarabha. So Shiva ripped apart his own form and threw its limbs away. The torso of the Sarabha became a Kapalika. Some say the Sarabha became a lingam which is a symbol of Shiva.

Sarabha, Narasimha, Gandaberunda and Pratyangira

The second half of this story makes us reflect. Like the Narasimha, we feel our righteous indignation is justified when we have to deal with unfairness. But like the Narasimha, we tend to get carried away by our anger and ego. Shiva as Sarabha teaches us the value of detachment and more importantly about how to use our energies wisely.

But it is not so easy to detach ourselves from Samsara, is it? Gandaberunda represents that inner struggle of ours – in which we grapple about helplessly and furiously because we are trapped between our worldly attachments and our deep desire for detachment. And that is when Shiva sends his feminine Shakti, Pratyangira to us. She, Pratyangira, gives us the Shakti to strike a perfect balance between attachment and

detachment, helps us regain our equanimity so that we can find the Vishnu residing within us.